

Spring has sprung. Hats and mittens are yielding way to sun visors and gardening gloves. The snowblowers are in the carriage houses, the baby strollers are out. The streets and sidewalks of the Washington Park neighborhood are once again bustling.

One year has passed since the Washington Park neighborhood tooted its horn in *Capital Region Living*. Since then, the neighborhoods around Washington Park – Pottery, Little Italy, South Central, Osgood, Historic Sage, River Triangle, Fifth Avenue – have seen unprecedented interest in homeownership. Three of the largest privately owned and financed rehabilitation projects were completed and new owners and residents moved in – 159 First Street, 3 Washington Place and 4 Washington Place. These were ‘back from the brink’ rescues of vacant, deteriorating buildings that required much more than TLC. These were also calculated gambles that the area will continue to be attractive to responsible owner occupants and that housing values will increase.

The neighborhood is building on the burst of interest from artists of all types – graphic, multi-media, performing, electronic arts. Larry Kagan, acclaimed sculptor and professor of art at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, bravely purchased a large corner property at Third and Liberty with unknown structural issues and has begun the conversion to his expanded art studio. His former studio, across the street from the larger location, has been sold to .... another artist. Kagan’s new space has room for additional artists and he is in the process of determining the best use for the extra space. Kagan opened the still-raw space as the site of the neighborhood’s first social event of the 2005 spring season – a potluck dinner on April 30.

Families are choosing to move to the Washington Park neighborhood, a reversal of the trend to seek suburban comfort. The past year has seen two families move to Troy for the educational opportunities offered by Emma Willard. Those families purposely sought a more urban setting to send out new roots. As Wendy Littlefield, formerly of Cooperstown and now of Troy, noted, “We wanted our children to experience a more diverse setting but yet have them feel a strong sense of community and commitment. Troy and Emma Willard were the logical place.”

The Mingoia family of Santa Rosa, California will soon call Troy home. Teenage daughter Gabriella is already in demand for babysitting for the baby boom around the Park. Peter and David Hamlin, Hannah Chupka, Charlotte Hobbs, Francesca Coppola and Gracie Groff are gearing up to help Gabriella lose that mellow California feeling. Michael Mingoia, graphic artist, purchased the family’s new First Street home on a quick trip to the East Coast. The rest of the family saw it after the closing. Their first thoughts were that all of their belongings would fit in one room of their huge brownstone. Their second thoughts were that they don’t know plaster from pilasters.

Singles with disposable incomes are not afraid of the challenges inherent in purchasing a neglected three story brownstone with more rooms than one could ever need. Cheryl Clark left a condo in Albany County to cross the Hudson River to Troy. “I purchased a multi-family brownstone known as the Roebing House on Washington Park. After closing, I really thought I had lost my mind. I certainly may have, but I’ve definitely found

a community of like-minded folks.” Clark is restoring the Roebling House and relies on her friendly neighbors to guide her through complex restoration decisions. Sam Judge, formerly of Vermont, finds himself facing the same challenges five doors south of Cheryl. He also sometimes feels as if he misplaced his usual common sense to embark on the journey of restoration at 222 Third Street. “As a real estate developer, I was initially attracted to the commercial properties in the heart of Troy. After purchasing several, I decided to make Troy my home. It really does make sense. I am in it for the long haul and see only positive things happening for Troy”, says Sam as he takes a break from stripping decidedly non-period wallpaper from his front parlor.

Gina Chapman lived for several years above a shop in the Antiques District on River Street before making the commitment to homeownership on First Street, around the corner from the Park and several buildings north of the Mingoias. She, too, is grappling with the challenges of homeownership and expanding her friendship network. “After years of paying rent for a small studio, I was ready to tackle a home. It was easy to purchase in Troy. A network of friends and soon-to-be neighbors helped every step of the way”, says Gina, gesturing with a paintbrush. New tools are scattered on the floor.

The neighborhoods and their contribution to preservation and community revitalization are being recognized by organizations such as the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway and the Rensselaer County Historical Society. The Gateway selected Lynn Kopka, president, and the Washington Park Association as its 2004 Annual Gala recipients for an outstanding contribution to the preservation and adaptation of the community’s heritage and inspiration to the community both today and tomorrow. The Historical Society will recognize in its 2005 Annual Gala this fall the driving force behind Little Italy, the DeFazio Family. Such recognition comes at a time when neighborhood groups are leading the charge to protect, preserve and promote urban living. Mike Esposito, an active neighborhood leader, sees these honors as proof of the long way that Troy has progressed since urban flight took hold decades ago. “Building community is not a nine to five job, it is a calling. Each new resident who gets caught in our web adds a little bit more to the vibrancy of the neighborhood,” says Mike, who got the call many years ago.

The Washington Park neighborhood continues to strengthen its community building activities. Scary goblins in the Park at Halloween, along with storyteller Pleasant DeSpain of the Osgood Neighborhood, pirates Elizabeth Wunderlich and Michael Ferrato of Little Italy and witch Sharon Bates of Historic Sage Neighborhood, make for a fun evening for kids from the neighborhood. The Neighborhood Arts Stroll, Friends of Prospect Park Hidden Garden Tour, Historic Sage and Washington Park participation in the Victorian Stroll allow the curious to explore the concept of urban living and return later to experience the reality.

The downtown neighborhoods make outreach and marketing a priority. It’s all about networking and connecting new comers with longtimers; those seeking help with those offering it, whether it is plaster work or a shoulder to lean on. The tours sponsored by the Historical Society, the Gateway, RPI and Sage bring new folks into Troy’s downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods. And those folks like what they see.

The continued emergence of downtown Troy as a viable shopping area, with its long established service sector of banks, government offices, post office, doctors and lawyers, has strengthened the surrounding neighborhoods. Many new homeowners are settling in downtown, “living above the store” in the configuration that made cities so successful in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Marc Coudert and Melissa Barry, Emily Dalton-Smith, Lauren and Ericka Groff and Kim and Jessie White are within shouting distance of each other, in the heart of downtown. The conversion of the former Stanley Building by the Pfeils and the renovation of the Market Block by John Hedley are spurring a Third Street renaissance. The next retail frontier is Fourth Street. This commercial center interest and development augments the residential component of the neighborhoods.

Investment is happening in undiscovered pockets as residential and commercial properties in the more established areas are snapped up in record time. Fifth Avenue, an overlooked street bordering the commercial district, has emerged in the past year as the new hot spot. Activists such as Jim and Beverly Traa, Michael Nofal, Barbara Jones Higbee and Greg Cholakis have banded together to maintain the integrity of the historic buildings and encourage owner-occupied investments on Fifth Avenue. Beverly notes, “As a result, preservation interest has jumped a natural barrier, Federal Street, and is beginning to take root north on Fifth where it will become a catalyst for renewal on adjoining streets and beyond to the north.” PiNaturals, a floral design shop at 2217 Fifth, and Ryan’s Wake, a pub at 403 River Street, are new businesses located north of Federal Street. Ty Austin and Jerry Ellis of PiNaturals have lived in downtown for several years and have blazed a trail in a previously neglected part of the area. They expect to start a trend.

Troy’s neighborhoods surrounding the downtown – Washington Park, Pottery, Little Italy, South Central, Osgood, Historic Sage, River Triangle, Fifth Avenue - are alive and well.